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AUTHOR Schulz, Dorothy Grant
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ABSTRACT

Since science fiction imaginatively explores the future, technology, and the human role in problem solving, it lends itself to the development of a process-oriented curriculum. Students may participate in planning, executing, and evaluating a study of science fiction, while they may learn through process goals to deal intelligently with change--a factor with which science fiction deals. Various current resources are available which can be of help to teachers who are planning science fiction courses. (JM)

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Dorothy Grant Schulz

Futuristic Humanistic Science Fiction

> In the darkness I could just see the thing--like an elephant trunk more than anything else--waving towards me and touching and examining the wall, coals, wood and ceiling. It was like a black worm swaying its blind head to and fro.
>
> Once, even, it touched the heel of my boot. I was on the verge of screaming.
>
> I bit my hand...(page 233, Wells, The War of the Worlds)

The "black worm" sways on the screen. The suspense mounts as the audience becomes engrossed in this filmed episode from The War of the Worlds. For the viewer, this science fiction film extract is an exciting and enjoyable experience. For the English teacher, this extract is a stimulating resource to bridge the diverse reading skill present in any classroom. This film extract, moreover, represents a new age of science fiction: a progression in the ideas presented in sf stories, as well as an expansion in the techniques available to sf teachers.

Forecasts of Human Potential: Science Fiction

In his book, The Universe Makers, Donald Wollheim outlines the phases in the expanding scope of science fiction. Having progressed from simple initial voyages to the moon and planets of our solar system, science fiction now encompasses the complexities of a Galactic Empire. Furthermore, Wollheim dichotomizes sf thinking into two diverging evolutions: Vernian

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and Wellsian. The early books of Jules Verne are nationalistic, Wollheim says, emphasizing the status quo, and stressing gadgets and inventions. H. G. Wells adds a new dimension--one that most current definitions of sf include. Wells stresses the impact of scientific advancement on humanity and a resultant change in social relationships.

However, it is not a simple cause and effect relationship. Unlike a computer model which may simulate social and economic behavior to predict mankind's future, sf writers use their imaginations to show not just one but many possible futures open to us, Ben Bova points out in Science Fiction Today and Tomorrow. Science fiction shows how these worlds and these futures affect human beings but, more important, how human beings create future worlds through their choices.

Our students have lived in the midst of this kind of speculation about the future all of their lives. They may have read Robert Heinlein's Have Space Suit Will Travel in 1958, then ten years later watched their television screens as men in space suits stepped onto the moon. They have seen how man looks to the future, develops the technology to explore, and solves problems rationally.

A Process-oriented Science Fiction Curriculum

It may be this futuristic, humanistic dimension of sf which is the most valuable. Indeed, to a teacher dedicated to a process-oriented curriculum, this dimension of sf study may be a primary goal.

Process goals might be:

1. To stimulate students to think critically and to hypothesize about the future.
2. To encourage students to investigate values.
3. To explore the future effects of our present handling of certain problems.

Within the process goals, students of sf may be learning to adjust intelligently to change. Change is certain. Science fiction is rooted in change. Science fiction attempts to deal with change. Sf writers have worried for generations about nuclear warfare, overpopulatior, behavior and thought control, and genetic engineering. For those who haven't worried (or at least thought about them), the resultant changes may be a shock. A study of sf may be a healthy way of avoiding future shock.

Students may also participate in the process of planning, executing, and evaluating a study of sf. Decisions must be made about:

1. Goals of the sf study:
   To explore the future effects of our present handling of certain problems; to study formal elements such as sf plots or characterization; to write a sf short story...
2. Theme:
   History of sf or works of one writer
   A topic such as satire, extrapolation
   Some problem or value (Overpopulation, biogenic engineering, Utopia or Dystopia; time travel; Humanity versus technology...)

3. Schedule and framework:

   Texts: single, multiple or pyramid; anthologies; paperbacks; library resources

   Films and records

   Group meetings every other day and presentations once a week...

   Individual or group culminating project

   Interdisciplinary, team approach; mini-course in any subject

4. Evaluation:

   Papers, presentations, projects

   Criteria for peer exchange and evaluation...

5. Progression of courses:

   Speculative curriculum ideas

Resources for Science Fiction Teachers

There are many good current resources available to teachers. Short course guides developed by classroom teachers appear in English Journal or Extrapolation (the journal of the MLA Seminar on Science Fiction, also serving the Science Fiction Research Association).

Barbara R. Tyler and Joan Biesekerski have written a quinmester course called "The Outer Limits" which is available from ERIC. Their curriculum guide places sf within a thematic framework of an exploration of unknown physical and mental worlds. It includes many imaginative ideas and resources which could be used within any framework.

Teaching Tomorrow: A Handbook of Science Fiction for Teachers is a valuable tool for sf teachers written by Elizabeth Calkins and Barry McGhan. It includes two study guides for sf stories and many suggestions for activities. The small book also includes useful lists of sf book dealers, publishers, professional magazines, amateur publications, conventions, organizations, motion pictures, books for girls, indexes, critical works, and recommended novels.

The curriculum possibilities for sf are discussed in a Guide to Science Fiction: Exploring Possibilities and Alternatives by Doris M. Paine and Diana Martínez. This resource for sf teachers presents specific sf themes and related books and develops several thematic units.

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